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The Pending Crisis in North Africa

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Conference Conclusions

- The weaknesses of the existing government leadership in Algeria point to eventual implosion, with either a return to 1960s warlordism or seizure of power by Islamic radicals. A radically oriented Islamic government would have an immediate and negative effect on the stability of the Maghreb. Tunisians fear a domino effect.

- The Tunisians oppose concessions to Islamic activists, both in Tunisia and in Algeria. They prefer tough law-and-order measures in both countries in what they believe is a "zero-sum game."

- The Tunisians are uncomfortable with U.S. policies ostracizing Qadhafi and Saddam Hussein, as well as official U.S. criticism of tight political and security controls by the Tunisian government. They believe that Washington is not focusing on the most critical threat to the region's stabilityþthe rise of radical Islam as a hostile political force.

- Regional security issues on which the United States has focused (proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Mediterranean, Libyan mischief, and unrest in the Western Sahara) are discounted by the Tunisians.

Background

The goal of the conference was to exchange views on regional security challenges, their underlying causes, and appropriate strategies for addressing them. Differing Tunisian and American perceptions of these challenges soon emerged.

The American security concern is two-tiered: the shorter-term threat is the incremental spread of radical Islam, ultimately capturing the region, creating a tide of refugees in France, Italy, and Spain. The longer-term threat is the possibility that radical- leaning regimes would acquire weapons of mass destruction and that those regimes would disrupt the Middle East peace process. Other American concerns included controlling state-directed terrorism and the possible resurgence of dormant non-Islamic radicalism by anti- Western and anti-U.S. figures, such as Qadhafi.

The Tunisian delegation emphasized three concerns: (1) the inherent vulnerability of Tunisia to unwanted external political and military influences, (2) the imperative of sustaining successful economic and social reform programs, and (3) the importance of playing a low-profile, intermediary role in regional affairs.

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Most Maghreb Union (UAM) member governments (Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia) face great internal and external problems caused by conflicts between radically oriented states, such as Iraq and Libya (the fifth UAM member), and the United States and its western allies. The lawless behavior of the radically oriented states and Western political and military reactions compel remaining UAM governments to make unwanted and uncomfortable choices between their involvement in regional coalitions (such as UAM) and their need for international (especially Western) trade and support.

As early as the 1991 Gulf War, for example, President Ben Ali of Tunisia risked losing valuable French and American aid because of Tunisia's refusal to participate with troops. The majority of Tunisians perceived the Gulf War as an unwarranted intervention by the United States and its coalition partners in Arab affairs. Saddam Hussein, in their view, was merely redressing the regional economic imbalance by taking action against the arrogant, "rich" ruling family of Kuwait.

"The Algerian FIS is regarded by Moroccans and Tunisians as the principal threat to stability in neighboring states."

The American participants at the Tunis Conference appreciated the special role of Tunisia and other North African states in moderating Middle East political and military crises by using their cultural links with the region to facilitate negotiations or mediate conflicts. Algerian mediators were involved in negotiations to end the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis. Tunis has served as headquarters of the Arab League, as well as the operational center for the Palestine Liberation Organization after both organizations were expelled from other Arab countries due to inter-Arab conflicts. Morocco contributed troops to the Gulf War in 1990-1991, and has served as a diplomatic bridge between Israel and several Arab states. Respected for his adroitness in international affairs, King Hassan II of Morocco has frequently been the Arab choice to explain Arab positions to the United States.

Four Challenges Facing North Africa

Demographics

Despite far-reaching reforms, the illiteracy rate of people over age 15 hovers near 50 percent in Morocco, 40 percent in Egypt, and 20 percent in Tunisia. Unemployment and underemployment levels are at 30 percent in Algeria and 25 percent in Egypt. Migration of rural populations to urban agglomerations is generating serious challenges, the most immediate being declining agricultural production, and social dysfunction within a floating *lumpen proletariat*.

External debt

Debt repayment consumes three-quarters of Algeria's annual export revenuesþthis at a time when the price of petro-chemicals, Algeria's primary export, is severely depressed.

Islamic Radicalism

The Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) is regarded by Moroccans and Tunisians as the principal threat to stability in neighboring states. The Tunisians feel strongly that the decision by the government in Algiers (responding to pressure from the military) to cancel the second phase of elections in December 1991 was prudent; they reject the suggestion that denying militant political elements an

opportunity to participate in the electoral process could further radicalize the movements and exacerbate the threat they already pose.

Proliferation of WMD

The North African perspective on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) differs markedly from that found among Eastern Medi-terranean states. While Arab nations acknowledge that the Arab-Israeli peace process holds the prospect of reducing regional military tensions, they continue to focus on the threat they perceive to be posed by a growing Israeli nuclear arsenal and the refusal of Washington to pressure Tel Aviv to cap their program and consider arms control measures. The Maghreb states, however, do not consider Israel's nuclear program as among their major security threats, but they do regard U.S. preoccupation with the possible acquisition of WMD by radical Arab regimes as misplaced.

The American Perspective

The U.S. delegates were less sanguine than their hosts about the emerging economic-political-security environment. At the same time, they did not consider that emerging security challenges in North Africa would impact directly on U.S. security interests.

Potential instability of centralized power.

Authoritarian regimes tend to be brittle. The more stable a non- democratic polity appears, the more that stability is vulnerable to the domestic challenges enumerated above. Centralized systems of power stand tallest but fall hardest.

Lack of a regional security community

The American participants stressed the need for greater efforts by the regional states themselves to form a more tangible security union. The UAM has made very little progress in achieving a consensus defining the future threat environment or toward adoption of regional measures to meet anticipated challenges.

The Tunisian Perspective

The Tunisian formulation was more positive in outlook and tone than the American. Focusing almost entirely on Tunisian strategies for growth and development, Tunisia's clear national priorities are to:

- liberalize the nation's economic system,

- reduce the population growth rate,

- stem the flow of population to urban centers,

- improve the educational system, and,

- provide employment for graduates.

Since the arrival of the Ben Ali government in 1987, notable progress has been registered in all these

sectors. The political landscape also has evolved under a National Charter to permit introduction of a multi-party system. According to this calculus, the only significant threat to this "economics-first" strategy is posed by the crisis in Algeria.

The Algerian Dimension

Conference participants from Tunisia and the United States diverged in their assessments of Algeria's problems. The Tunisian participants saw the Algerian situation as representative of a threat extending throughout the Middle East, but having special saliency in North Africa. The challenge is aimed at the foundations of secularism and modernism, which are the twin goals of states such as Tunisia. To recognize Islamic radicals as legitimate aspirants to political power is to open a Pandora's box of troubles, including the removal of political boundaries between religion and state. Moreover, should Islamic extrem-ists rise to power, they would be likely to create a cultural divide with the West and (as in Iran and Sudan) seek to eradicate all vestiges of secular political parties. Hence, Tunisians support Algerian leadership in dealing firmly with religious radicals, using harsh measures when necessary.

"Terrorism and the state's response to it are reducing Algeria to a condition bordering on economic collapse and political paralysis."

Several American participants emphasized the costs to Algerian society of polarization. Terrorism and the state's response to it are reducing Algeria to a condition bordering on economic collapse and political paralysis. The present mix of military and civilian leadership is unrepresentative, and clearly lacks legitimacy in the eyes of a growing number of Algerians. A *constructive* dialogue is impera-tiveþpossibly with the support of a Third Party inter-mediary. Barring such an effort, the prospect is for a descent into chaos, leading to a truncated Islamic regime or a return to warlordism reminiscent of 1962 Algeria. Either outcome could present serious political and religious difficulties for Morocco and Tunisia.

Regional Security Arrangements

While Europeans and Americans are dimly aware of the challenges confronting the states of the southern Mediterranean, they tend too frequently to view the looming crisis as a clash of Islamic and Christian civilizations. Their chief concerns are the security problems likely to arise from North African "boat people" fleeing Islamic repression. A second area of concern to Americans and Europeans relates to weapons of mass destruction -- most particularly efforts by Libya and Algeria to acquire chemical and nuclear weapons, as well as surface-to-surface missile systems of extended range and increasing accuracy. American participants viewed the risk of nuclear proliferation as most advanced in Algeria, which has not as yet signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and may be engaged in unsafeguarded activities. They fear that Algeria may become a rogue state, pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons program.

The Tunisian delegation, for its part, discounted any threat posed by Algeria's acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. They expressed no distress over either Libya's efforts to acquire comparable systems or U.S. support for Israel's nuclear program. What interest in regional security issues arose tended to be directed toward the Arab Maghreb Union as a defensive alliance capable of dealing with them. On the other hand, there was wide recognition that the Union lacked solid security foundations and a common perceived threat, and that unresolved rivalries (e.g., Morocco-Algeria) vitiated cooperation on regional security matters. Tunisia sees its true security links as North-South, not East-West.

Yet, most Tunisian and American participants felt that the timing for formation of a North-South "security community" was premature. Their shared reticence was the product, in part, of past failed effortsþperhaps the best-known of which was the "Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean" (CSCM) proposal, put forward by Spain and Italy in September 1990. This proposal suggested building upon existing cooperative air defense agreements between Morocco and Spain, patterning new developments on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

CSCM was problematic in its reach. It included all of the Mediterranean including the Levant, and even anticipated expansion into the Gulf region. In the end, CSCM proved too complex and ambiguous to be acted upon quickly, and it ultimately collided with an alternative proposal put forward by Franceþthe "Five-Plus-Four" initiative, later modified to include Malta, and now known as the "Five-Plus-Five" proposal. The French proposal sought to link the four European Community states of France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, plus Malta, with the five North African states which form the Maghreb Union.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations flow from the conference.

- The United States should broaden its regional diplomatic initiatives to include formation of a coalition that includes France, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, to openly address the danger of regional political instability and the potential for the spread of political radicalism to adjacent regions.

- The United States should strengthen efforts to convince North Africa of the adverse consequences flowing from proliferating weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, including pressure on the regime in Algiers to open its nuclear program to full-scope safeguards and inspection.

- The United States should propose a closer association between NATO and Maghreb militaries, to encourage more frequent consultation between and among defense ministers and chiefs of staff. A possible site for these discussions would be AFSOUTH head-quarters in Naples, Italy.

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